Meet the Comics With Patrick McDonnell, Creator, "Mutts"
Hosted by Suzanne Tobin
Washington Post Comics Editor
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Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion, hosted by Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin.

Created by Patrick McDonnell in 1994, Mutts is currently distributed to more than 450 newspapers. Unlike many other comic strips with animal characters, Mutts' Earl (the dog) and Mooch (the cat) get their charm acting much more like pets than people. McDonnell was online Friday, Aug. 17 at 1 p.m. EDT to answer questions and take comments about his daily cartoon.

While Mutts is still relatively new to the comics pages, it has already received a high level of recognition. Charles Schulz called "one of the best [comic strips] of all time." McDonnell lives in New Jersey with his wife, Karen, his dog, Earl, and their cat, Meemow. When not working on his many projects, he enjoys painting and playing the drums.

The transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Welcome, comics fans, to our biweekly chat with a talented cartoonist who graces the pages of The Washington Post Style section. Today we are thrilled to have as our guest Patrick McDonnell, creator of "Mutts," who is joining us from his studio in New Jersey. Welcome, Patrick, and thanks so much for giving our readers your time, so that they can meet and greet you online.

Patrick McDonnell: Happy to be here, Suzanne, and looking forward to it.

Tampa, FL: Hi!

I start every work day by flipping on my Mac and reading Mutts-that way I start the day with a smile on my face.

Your range of characters is fantastic, and your drawing style is wonderful. When did you decide to take on issues such as the loss of the world's amazing animals (Earth Day strip, I think), and animal adoption? Those really touch my heart, and I am so appreciative that you're bringing those issues to the table.

Thanks for all you're doi

Patrick McDonnell: "Mutts" is a combination of my two loves, my love for cartooning and my love for animals. And it was important to me to keep the animals, animal like. I try to do this strip from their perspective, and unfortunately it's a pretty tough world for animals. So since they can't speak for themselves, I try to help get their message across.

Bethesda, Md.: Where does Mooch's lisp come from?

Patrick McDonnell: The art of the comics strip is words and pictures, and that's all we have to play with. I'm a big fan of early comics strips and there was definitely alot more of playing with the language in the early cartoons. I had a friend who said "Yesh," once in a while, and so Mooch seemed the perfect personality to talk that

way. And then there was shmaybe and shmousie and it got out of hand. And I once got a letter from a fan, probably one of the few angry ones I ever received, and she said that cats would never talk that way!

Washington, D.C.: Hi Patrick. Love your comic strip. Are Mooch and Earl modeled after real animals?

Patrick McDonnell: I grew up with cats as a kid. And Mooch is probably a combination of the few cats I've had the pleasure of knowing. Right now Mooch is probably being influenced by the cat I live with now, Meemow, who my wife rescued from a parking garage. And Earl is based on my dog Earl, a 12-year-old Jack Russell terrier. And all of the strips that are just Ozzie and Earl are autobiographical.
While I'm working, Earl sleeps at my feet and Meemow sleeps on my drawing table. (I've actually had Meemow's tale swipe away a not-yet-dried ink drawing.)

Tampa, Fla.: Patrick, how did you begin drawing small panels for Sports Illustrated and did that help push you toward doing a daily strip/Mutts? I really enjoy your work and the keen sensitivity you show in the strip. Thank you.

Patrick McDonnell: Thanks for the kind words.
I wanted to be a cartoonist ever since I was about 3 or 4 years old. I went to the School of Visual Arts in New York City. When I graduated, I sort of got illustration jobs and kind of got sidetracked working for Sports Illustrated, Time Magazine and the New York Times.
I always saw my humorous illustrations for those magazines as sort of a comic strip, because I had a cast of characters that I used.
It was definitely good practice. Ozzie and Earl (I didn't know they were Ozzie and Earl at the time) were two of the characters in my illustrations.
When I finally started drawing "Mutts," I really felt like I was home, that that was what I was meant to do.

Cleves, Ohio: I'm curious to know some of your influences on Mutts. Judging by the comic, I'd guess Frank Zappa, beat poetry (that Ginsburg "Howl" reference to Guard Dog was one of your best comics in my opinion), Captain Beefheart, Krazy Kat, fairy tales and a bit of Western philosophy. What books and music would you recommend fans to read or listen to to get some of the in-jokes you stick in your strip?

Patrick McDonnell: Well, you've picked up on most of them. I'll mention some other cartoonists, like Segar's "Popeye" and Richard Outcault's "Buster Brown."

Arlington, Va.: First, it is a joy every day to turn to the comics and smile over Mutts (the only thing missing is the brick) -- especially on Sunday -- great stuff. Which brings me to my question. I know there is a technical name for the introductory panel on the Sunday strip. Sometimes we see it in the Post and other times it isn't there. Do you always draw this intro panel? Does the Post edit it out on occasion or is it that you only produce it from time to time?

Patrick McDonnell: I call it the title panel, and I draw a title panel every Sunday. I probably spend too much time on them, it doesn't help me make my deadline at all. I do them every week and it's up to the newspaper to decide whether to print them or not, and it's very disappointing when they don't.

Suzanne Tobin: I will definitely look into that. I don't actually "edit" the layout of the Sunday comics. It's done by a service in Buffalo. So I'll see what I can do about getting the title panel in whenever possible. I know that sometimes the configuration gets

tricky with Sunday comics, so that may be part of the problem.

Linden, N.J.: We love Mutts. When will you be doing calendars again? We have all that you did.

Patrick McDonnell: Actually, there should be a 2002 wall calendar and a small desk calendar coming out in September. And I plan on doing these every year from now on.

College Park, Md.: Will Butchie ever toss Earl and Mooch some scraps instead of tossing them out? Or would that be too much like Lucy letting Charlie Brown kick the football?

Patrick McDonnell: It would, but I never say never.

Fairfax, Va.: You should know that you have started a whole new lingo! Our cat chases his "shmousie" around endlessly.

Patrick McDonnell: Every cat needs a shmousie.

Corning, N.Y.: Where did the little pink sock idea come from? I think it's absolutely hysterical!

Patrick McDonnell: I think there's alot of cats out there who like their little socks, and from the fan letters I received, there seem to be alot of pink socks, specifically. I think I tapped into something there.

Washington, D.C.: "Mutts" is the first thing I look at before I go to work everyday. I especially love the 'little pink sock' episodes. Thanks for the daily pick-me-ups!

Patrick McDonnell: Thanks for the kind words. Actually on my drawing board right now is a Sunday page about the pink sock. Look for it on Oct. 14.

Baltimore, Md.: Hi Mr. McDonnell. I've heard that you work with The Humane Society of the United States. Can you tell us about what you do for them? I understand you are a big supporter of animal sheltering issues. Thanks for your wonderful strip. You do a great service to pet lovers and pets everywhere!

Patrick McDonnell: Since my strip is about a cat and dog who have a loving home and loving owners, I thought it was only right to do stories on cats and dogs who are still looking for that. Around '97, I was planning to do a series on animal shelters, and, coincidentally, I was contacted by the Humane Society of the United States about their "National Animal Shelter Appreciation Week," which is the last week in November. So that's how "Shelter Stories" came to be.
And then last year I was honored to be appointed to the Board of Directors of the Humane Soceity
They are a wonderful organization, doing great work to help animals and I'm very proud to be part of it.

New Brunswick, N.J.: Are you planning on selling any other Mutts merchandise in the U.S. (such as t-shirts, plush animals, etc)? Thanks, Matt

Patrick McDonnell: Well, there's the calendars I already mentioned, as well as seven books from Andrews and McMeel, with a new full-color book, "Sunday Mornings," coming out in September that will include all the title panels we talked about earlier.
And hopefully in the future there will be a few SELECT quality products.

Alexandria, Va.: When I read the comics, I turn to "Mutts" first, so thanks for the many smiles you have given me. Earl and Mooch are so expressive -- you must get your inspiration from your own mutts. What other comic strip mutts do you like? I am partial to "Liberty Meadows" because Oscar reminds me of my own weiner dog.

Patrick McDonnell: I would have to say that Snoopy was my first love.

Chantilly, Va.: I love your art -- it's such a wonderful homage to Krazy Kat, but with a life all its own. What's your favorite part of cartooning? The deadlines?

Patrick McDonnell: That's a hard question. Cartooning is just something I love to do. Making those little characters come alive is very rewarding.

Buffalo, N.Y.: Patrick Mcdonnell,

I would really just like to thank you for the impact that you have had on me with your comic strip. It is one thing to be an animal lover, but to actually adapt to an animal's personality is another. I really feel that you have developed a communication between your characters that really breaks the boundaries of what a lot of people expect their pets to be.
I only assume that you have a very open mind and heart towards your

own family and pets because of the issues you address through your comic. I find it extrodinary how your characters deal with issues of lonliness, love or abandonment even endangerment. It is honest and simple and as a human I have so much to learn with and from your characters. Thank You.

Patrick McDonnell: Wow.

Cartoon Geek: Can you tell us about your drawing process and what kind of pens/tools you use? I'm learning how to cartoon and would be grateful for some tips/advice.

Patrick McDonnell: As far as advice, I think the most important thing to do is practice all the time. Just draw. And more important is to find your own voice.
As for tools, I've used alot of different pens over the years and right now I'm using a fountain pen with Calli India ink.

McLean, Va.: My 85 year old mother lives in St. Louis. Unfortunately the Post Dispatch does not carry MUTTS so I clip each day and send weekly. She saves all of the MUTTS in albums. MUTTS gives her such joy -- she says it is one thing she always looks forward to and she loves to call and talk about Earl and Mooch's adventure. I have also given her all the MUTTS books I have found. Will there be more MUTTS complilations?

Patrick McDonnell: See about the new book above.
I tend to get alot of fan mail from senior citizens. I think they relate to the quieter tone of Mutts, and I think that they also pick up on my love of comic strips from their youth.
Give my best to your mom.

New Delhi, India: Mr. McDonell, I adore your work. Earl and Mooch regularly make me laugh. There are times when I come up with gags which can only be spoken by Earl or mooch. I'd like to know if I can send those rough ideas to you, just to see how you finally shape them.

Patrick McDonnell: Thanks for the offer, but I take pride in doing the whole strip by myself.

Sterling, Va.: Mr. McDonnell,

Just a thanks for creating a great strip. I had to put my dog to sleep a few years ago and one series you did really summed up how I felt.

It's the one where the owner took Earl to the vet and when he came home without him everything in the house reminded him of Earl, his toys, his bowl, etc. so he ended up howling out the window. It's how I felt and how I still feel. I keep that strip above a picture of my beloved dog. When I miss her, I howl.

Patrick McDonnell: I'm sorry for your loss. I would howl also. I glad I gave you some solace.

East Rockaway, N.Y.: I am a Mutts junkie. I was sad to see Calvin & Hobbes go, but Mutts has won my heart. I own every book and calendar, but I (and many others I know) would love it if you would OK some t-shirts or sweatshirts. Please say yesh! (p.s.I have been making my own cause I love those little faces, but I don't want to go to jail.)

Patrick McDonnell: Hopefully, we'll have the right T-shirt soon.

Washington, D.C.: Both my wife and I are big fans of your work. It really adds "humanity" to our lives! Do you ever sell original art for your strips?

Patrick McDonnell: I don't sell any originals. Occasionally, I do donate some to charity. So you'll have to keep on the lookout.

Germantown, Md.: I just wanted to let you know that I hadn't thought of adopting an animal from a shelter until I started reading your comics. I am now the proud "mom" of a great dog, a terrific cat, and a lovable rabbit that were all adopted from my local shelter. I will never "buy" another pet again. Thank you!

Patrick McDonnell: You've made my day! Thank you.

Arlington, Va.: Where do you get your ideas for the "Shelter Stories" strips during National Animal Shelter Appreciation Week? Those stories are so touching. Thanks!

Patrick McDonnell: I've been to shelters, but I also try to get inside the heads of my own dog and cat, and try to feel how they would react if they were in that situation.

Washington, D.C.: Will we ever get to meet Mooch's sweetie, Schnelly?

Patrick McDonnell: No, I think that's another one of Lucy's footballs.

Alexandria, Va.: Hello Mr. McDonnell!
Mutts is drawn so wonderfully. I enjoy looking at it every day. I also very much like the way you often use the Sunday space. I would like to ask a question about a strip that appeared on Sunday quite some time ago. In it, Mooch is berating squirrels for dropping nuts on people and at the end he shakes the tree, intending to shake out the squirrels. Instead he knocks Earl unconscious with nuts. My question is thus: that cartoon had the panels out of narrative sequence. It was very funny, both to look at and to read. Did you intend it that way from inception? Also, did you get any reactions at the time?

Patrick McDonnell: Unfortunately, the services that put Sunday comics pages together take liberties they would never take with other artists. In that particular case, they changed it from a horizontal to a vertical format and on top of everything else, they printed it out of sequence. So it became a piece of "dada" art.

Christchurch, New Zealand: Hi Pat. I'm an international cartoonist. I color on computer using Freehand and Adobe Streamline and I export images as jpgs. How do you work? Your work looks very hand-colored (nice).

You'd love my 'Hot Dog' (he's a sausage dog in a cooking strip). John Stringer

Patrick McDonnell: I'm a traditional guy. I don't even own a computer. The way it works is I make xeroxes of my black-and-white Sunday page art, and then I actually watercolor the xerox. I put numbers for each color for references for the printer. That's the way it was done for years, and that's the way I'm still doing it.
It's a tricky system and it took me about two years to get the hang of it.

Sydney, Australia: I really admire your linework. Sorry it's a hoary old question, but what tools do you use to create your strip?

Patrick McDonnell: I think I answered that already. I think the only thing I didn't say already is that I use Strathmore Bristol paper (plate finish).

Buffalo, N.Y.: have you ever thought of bringing Mutts to animation?

Patrick McDonnell: Recently I've been giving that much thought. And if I could get it done correctly, I might do it.

Silver Spring, Md.: Patrick, I think Mutts is a fantastic comic strip. Mooch and Earl, and all of their friends, are funny and lovable. Please keep highlighting animals waiting for adoption -- they may not be funny, but they touch people. Thanks for creating one of the highlights of my day.

Patrick McDonnell: I know we're out of time, but I'd like to thank all of you for joining me online and making this a highlight of my day.

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks so much, Patrick. It's been a delight to get acquainted with you personally, since we're all already acquainted with your work. Make sure you give Earl and Meemow an extra treat for sharing you with us today.